

Sensemaya blends many styles to get crowds up and dancing

Author(s): PHILIP SCHWARTZ

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In so many words, David Gleason, the 27-year-old brainchild behind the local sextet **Sensemaya**, admits he's no purist. And he's unapologetic about it. The band he started when he returned to the region four years ago was at first strictly a **Latin-jazz** outfit. But before long, **Sensemaya** began infusing more styles -- funk-inflected salsa, modern Cuban dance and Brazilian influences, etc. -- into an already eclectic amalgam. Even in the beginning, crowds responded to the band's live shows by dancing, which, Gleason said, became a catalyst for mixing up the brew more.

"**Latin-jazz** is a hybrid form anyway," the Colonie-bred pianist explained last week when he sat for an interview in a Schenectady coffee shop. "But when I saw that people were into dancing to it, I thought we could give them something dance-able and at the same time have music we could improvise with."

Distinct Differences

With salsa in the backdrop and the **Latin** vibe running throughout, comparisons to Alex Torres, the region's **Latin** music giant, might be inevitable. But Gleason is quick to point out one major distinction, again hinting at the purist thing. "Alex is the true art form of salsa. He is to a T everything a salsa band should be," Gleason said. "We are the red-headed bastard stepchildren of salsa -- and **jazz**."

He laughs saying this last part, a little self-deprecating humor. But the approach that Gleason, and **Sensemaya** as a whole, take appears far from cavalier. When he returned to this region to form **Sensemaya**, it was from his years at Tufts University in Boston, where he earned a master's degree in ethnomusicology, and in his spare time played with some of that city's veteran salsa players. He did his thesis on the parranda, a Christmas serenading tradition of Puerto Rico, and traveled to the island during the holidays to conduct participatory research.

Teaching Points

Meanwhile, speaking with Gleason, who teaches in Schenectady schools, is like a music and culture lesson. At one point, he quotes in Spanish a passage from Nicolas Guillen, the Cuban poet whose work inspired the **Sensemaya** band name. At another point, he talks in detail about timba, a modern Cuban dance music, a kind of "funky salsa," that's been a huge influence on him.

In short, while his band is an amalgam of forms, Gleason knows the context in which **Sensemaya**'s music exists.

At the same time, he realizes that being primarily of Italian descent and having band members with a mix of European and **Latin** roots can sometimes mean overcoming a perception problem. Even so, given how crowds have reacted, he's not too worried on that end.

"It's always interesting when we play for a **Latin** audience," he said. "It's like, how are they going to take this? But they're very receptive to it. People care what it sounds like, not so much where it comes from. . . . And we're not trying to imitate any form; we're trying to blend it. That's the future of our country, too. We've always been a melting pot but in the future we're going to be more so as the country becomes more **Latin**."

Debut Album

These days, the band is in the studio recording its proper debut album -- Gleason and company put out a demo CD just after forming -- that **Sensemaya** hopes to release sometime next year. And as the band has made the shift to more eclectic, hot, dance-able material, so, too, has it shifted more toward originals and away from standards. Even so, the focus remains on creating an artful music with complex grooves that still reaches an audience and gets them in the aisles.

"The greatest feeling to me," Gleason said, "is to be doing a solo and know that it's inspiring people to move. And then they throw that energy right back at you."

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